DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 220 037 HE 015 396

AUTHOR Bartels, Joern
TITLE Drop-Out at the Distance University in the Federal Republic of Germany. AIR Forum 1982 Paper.
PUB DATE May 82
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research (22nd, Denver, CO, May 16-19, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Aspiration; Academic Persistence; Age Differences; Dropout Attitudes; *Dropout Characteristics; Educational Background; Extension Education; *External Degree Programs; *Foreign Countries; Full Time Students; Higher Education; *Open Universities; Part Time Students; Sex Differences; *Student Attrition; Student Employment
IDENTIFIERS *AIR Forum; Distance Education; *Distance University (West Germany)

ABSTRACT

Student attrition at the Distance University in the Federal Republic of Germany was studied. The Distance University, which was founded in December 1974, offers the following departments: mathematics and computer sciences, electrical engineering, economics and law, and education and the social sciences. The university is directed toward people with full-time jobs who cannot attend a conventional university. The analysis includes degree students who are studying full-time or part-time, and dropouts are considered to be students who have discontinued their studies at the Distance University, or who have changed their course of studies or the student category under which they registered. The dropout rate is highest among the students of mathematics, whereas it is lowest among the students of economics. During the first four semesters, student success is largely dependent on their educational background. Women students usually discontinue their studies more frequently than male students. In addition, the older the part-time students are, the lower the dropout rate. After 1 year, 47 percent of all beginning students discontinued their studies. Their vocational commitment often prevented students from completing their assignments: family, job, and study demands often were too much. The percentage of students complaining about missing social contact because of studying at a distance has been increasing, and students who did not begin with a view of gaining a degree were more likely to drop out. The dropout rate is highest among students possessing no formal entrance qualifications, women, and students under 25 years old. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED220037

Drop-out at the Distance University in the Federal Republic of Germany

Dr. Joern Bartels
Akademischer Oberrat
Fernuniversität-Gesamthochschule
Zentrum für Fernstudienentwicklung
Postfach 940
5800 Hagen 1
Federal Republic of Germany
Telephone number 02331 83240

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Association for

~~Institutional Research~~

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Twenty-Second Annual AIR Forum, May 16-19, 1982. Denver, Colorado

HE 015 396

THE ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

This paper was presented at the Twenty-Second Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Denver Hilton Hotel in Denver, Colorado, May 16-19, 1982. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum papers.

D. R. Coleman, Chairman
Forum Publication
Advisory Committee

Abstract

After one year, forty-seven percent of all beginning students discontinue their course of studies at the first German Distance University. The drop-out rate among the students of mathematics is above average, with two-thirds of the mathematicians withdrawing after two years of study. The drop-out rate is the highest among students possessing no formal entrance qualification ("Abitur"), women and students under 25 years of age. The main reason for dropping out is the triple stress caused by vocational commitment. family and study as well as the underestimation of the degree of difficulty. Studying in isolation is increasingly regarded as a problem.

Introduction

In contrast to America, very little research has been done in the Federal Republic of Germany on the drop-out problem in postsecondary education, Grimm (1976). In spite of the fact that there are departments with very high drop-out rates even among students who have only just entered university, their withdrawal tends to be accepted as a matter of course. Not only are empirical studies in this field rare, Peters (1981), but often they are deliberately discouraged in an effort to hide the true extent of the problem. Many academics feel, too, that a high drop-out rate is an indication of the high standard of teaching rather than of its ineffectiveness.

The situation is definitely different at the first Distance University (Fernuniversität) in the Federal Republic of Germany. Since its foundation special emphasis has always been placed on getting information about the extent of dropping-out and the reasons why students have discontinued their studies. There was general agreement within the university that institutional causes of dropping-out should be eliminated as quickly as possible and that empirical research was necessary to locate these causes. At the end of each academic year, therefore, all students who had withdrawn during the year, received a written questionnaire aimed at discovering the reasons for their dropping-out. These results, together with the official enrollment statistics, form the basis for our analysis on the drop-out problem at the Distance University.

German research into the drop-out problem suggests that drop-out rates are above average in economics and social sciences as well as in mathematics, Griesbach, Lewin, and Schacher (1977).

Institutions of distance learning have been shown to have higher drop-out rates than other universities, as the more time which elapses since a student gained his or her entrance qualification, the less likely he or she is to complete his or her course of studies, Kath, Oehler, and Reichwein (1966). Students are especially prone to withdrawing during the first few semesters of their studies. The likelihood that they stay on to take their degree increases with time, James and Wylie (1959).

SOME DETAILS ABOUT THE DISTANCE UNIVERSITY

At this point it seems necessary to insert a short description of the Distance University's departments and of the different categories of students. In December 1974 the state of North Rhine-Westphalia founded the Distance University in Hagen and in September 1975 teaching commenced. The following departments were established at the Distance University: Mathematics and Computer Sciences, Electrical Engineering, Economics and Law plus Education and the Social Sciences.

The Distance University is open to different groups of distance students. In particular the Distance University is aimed at people in full-time employment who cannot attend a conventional University because of their occupational and private situation. It has four different categories of students: Depending on their previous qualifications and future goals students can register as full-time students, part-time students, subsidiary students or guest students. Up until the Winter Semester of 1981/82 studies at the Distance University were free of charge.

Full-time students possess the formal entrance qualifications required by law and study for a degree at the Distance University such as a Diploma, Master of Arts or a State Examination. Their course of studies, which may be

considered their full-time occupation, may take three or four years.

Part-time students also possess the required entrance qualifications. Usually they are in full-time or part-time employment, attempting to get a university degree in their free time. The difference to full-time students lies in the reduced work load,which is three-quarters or half the regular program. The time needed to get a degree is accordingly longer.

Subsidiary students are normally registered at another university and study at the Distance University in order to complement their course of studies there. It is possible for them to take examinations at the Distance University if they have registered accordingly.

Guest students are not required to have a formal entrance qualification but they also cannot get a degree at the Distance University. They may complete individual courses in order to advance their own education.

In the academic year of 1981/82 the student distribution was as follows: full-time students 7 percent, part-time students 31 percent, subsidiary students 25 percent and guest students 37 percent. Only a quarter of the registered students are women.

DROPPING-OUT AT THE DISTANCE UNIVERSITY

In this report we will look only at those students who are studying at the Distance University with the aim to get a degree. These are the full-time and part-time students. When a guest student or a subsidiary student discontinues his or her studies at the Distance University, he or she may not be described as a genuine drop-out, as his or her original intention may have been fullfilled already.

We will now define what is meant by the term drop-out: Drop-outs are those students who have given up their studies at the Distance University altogether, who have changed their course of studies or the student category under which they registered. This narrow definition of drop-out is misleading in so far as those students are also included who have not left the Distance University. But they are given a new registration number for each change of student category and therefore are considered drop-outs for administrative purposes. In addition, a few of the Distance University's drop-outs have continued their studies at a conventional university, Calder and McIntosh (1974). For the purposes of our discussion they are considered drop-outs because they have discontinued their distance study.

ANNUAL ANALYSIS OF STUDENT STATISTICS

The annual analysis of the student statistics of the Distance University indicates that the drop-out problem is continually increasing for our full-time and part-time students, most of whom (sixty-three and eighty-eight percent respectively) follow another occupation while studying. In the first two years of the existence of the Distance University only about every third student discontinued his or her studies after the first year. In 1981, however, the drop-out rate was as high as fourty-seven percent. The drop-out rate is highest among the students of mathematics, whereas it is lowest among the students of economics. But as time passes, these drop-out rates become more and more similar. After the first two years of study, as many as two out of three students of mathematics and every second student of economics have discontinued their studies. In the following years, however, there has been a definite decrease in drop-out rates. Those students who have studied (for three years or more) at the Distance University withdraw only in exceptional cases. Here it is mainly a case of full-time students, rather than part-time students. In the first years of study exactly the reverse is true.

The sharp increase in drop-out rates is linked with a sharp increase in the overall number of students. Having started work with 1,300 students in 1975, as many as 37,000 students were registered at the Distance University in 1981. Two reasons may have caused both the higher overall enrollment and the higher drop-out rates: Many students are presumed to have enrolled merely out of general interest and without the intention of gaining a degree, while others may have underestimated the difficulty of distance learning. The first may be due to the fact that no fees or only nominal fees are charged, the second to inadequate information about the requirements of courses of studies, Watkins (1977).

During the first four semesters,success of students is largely dependent on their school education. Students of mathematics without a formal university entrance qualification ("Abitur") will, as a rule, discontinue their study very soon.

At the Distance University, women students usually discontinue their studies more frequently than male students, although the differences become smaller over time.

The older the part-time students are, the lower is the drop-out rate, Rekkedal (1972). Fifty-seven percent of the students under 25 discontinue their studies after the first year of study, but only about every third student over 46 years of age.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Our research into dropping-out at the Distance University, which was carried out in successive years using a mail questionnaire covered broadly the following areas:

- demographic data
- reasons for studying at the Distance University
- choice of major subject
- content of courses
- reasons for discontinuing at the Distance University.

Our results indicate several distinctive factors influencing the drop-out rate among distance students. Students most often attribute their dropping-out to factors which are not directly related to the teaching provided, Bååth (1981). Our findings show that their vocational commitment often prevented students from completing their assignments within the time limits which the university set them thus causing them to discontinue. The triple stress caused by vocational commitment, family and study proved to be too great and, moreover, unexpected. Often, too, the printed study material could not be mastered within the periods set by the university. In addition, the fact that a student has to study in isolation also plays an essential part in dropping-out. As students have no contact with members of the Distance University's staff or with other students there is a lack of mental motivation which contributes to dropping-out. The percentage of students complaining about missing social contact is constantly increasing.

STYLE OF WORK

A number of the drop-outs did not succeed in adapting their style of work to the teaching system of the Distance University. The Distance University sets relatively rigid deadlines which must be met by those students who wish to get a credit for the course. This setting of deadlines aims at motivating the students to work at a steady pace. But the requirements of their jobs often prevent the students from meeting these deadlines. Consequently, during the last few years the Distance University has adapted the deadlines more to the needs of the students. Now each individual course has fewer dates by which assignments have to be sent in.

Our findings generally show that drop-outs had been working less with the study material than successful students. Also, they were less satisfied with the contents of their courses. Students who did not begin with a view to gaining a degree were much more likely to drop-out.

CHOICE OF MAJOR SUBJECT

One of the most important factors for continuing the course of studies is the choice of a major subject according to one's own inclination. Otherwise the students will not be highly motivated to finish their degree course. The Distance University only offers a limited range of subjects. Many students chose a subject they were not really interested in. Otherwise they would not have been able to study at all. They were hoping to become more interested in the subject as they became increasingly familiar with it. It did not take long for this hope to prove to be a mistake. Especially the women among the drop-outs would have preferred to study a different subject. About sixty percent of them had been enrolled on a course that held no real interest for them. With male students the proportion is only about one in

three. Obviously, women are confined to the home more than men and are therefore more likely to take on a course of studies at the Distance University. Yet the limited range of subjects is geared more to the traditionally male disciplines. The wrong choice of subject will be an important factor for dropping-out as long as there is not a wider range to choose from, or as long as students are restricted to certain courses and therefore are prevented from taking those courses they are most interested in.

Most of the drop-outs would have preferred to study at a traditional university. This is especially true for the part-time students of education and of social sciences and of electrical engineering.

LACK OF SUPPORT

Students are less likely to complete their courses if their families, friends and colleagues do not support them. This is a problem. Drop-outs complain about this lack of support much more frequently than those students still enrolled at the Distance University. Often their husbands or wives did not accept the fact that they were studying and made it more difficult for them in the hope that they would discontinue. When students encounter such lack of understanding from many sides, they need to have a very strong will to finish their course of studies and to get their degree. If, on top of that, they are not successful in their courses, dropping out is a logical consequence. This, of course, is very satisfying for everybody who had been telling them all along that they would not be able to manage to get a degree and work at the same time.

Most students did not tell their bosses and colleagues that they were enrolled at the Distance University, Winkelmann (1981).

On the one hand, they were afraid that they would be put under more pressure in their jobs because people would assume that someone who takes up a university course does not work hard enough at work. On the other hand, there was always the risk of failure which would mean disgrace if it was generally known that they had been planning to get a degree.

SETTING DIFFERENT PRIORITIES

Students who have dropped out have often realized that their chances to better their occupational position through gaining a degree were not as high as they expected when they started their course of studies. An expected financial improvement and improved career chances are no longer considered worthwhile in relation to the present personal investment. Consequently, their studying at the Distance University is no longer seen as profitable in relation to the cost. Taking this into consideration, these students find it easy to drop-out. In spite of changing their opinion of their own course of studies and in spite of students setting different priorities, Bååth (1981), they do not consider as lost the time which they spent on courses at the Distance University. Many drop-outs are later planning to take up studying again, Moses (1979), usually taking a different course of studies.

STUDENT'S PERSONAL INCOMPETENCY

Very often drop-outs ascribe their failure to complete their course of studies to their own incompetency rather than to the university as an institution, although there are, or have been, quite considerable institutional shortcomings, such as dispatch problems, excessive workloads, tight dead-lines etc. Our findings suggest that many students accept these institutional shortcomings in the belief that there is nothing they can

do about them anyway.

"TRANSPARENT" UNIVERSITY

One other great problem for the students is the fact that many course authors do not regard the students as their actual target group, but rather their colleagues at other universities. Since the Distance University is a new and "transparent" university, professors often fear being checked up on and being criticised from outside. If they produced their course material with greater confidence,concentrating fully on the students as their target group, drop-out rates at the Distance University could no doubt be reduced.

REFERENCES

Bååth, J. Research on Completion and Discontinuation in Distance Education. Paper to the EHSC. Madrid 1981.

Calder, J. and McIntosh, N. Student Drop-out, Wastage and Withdrawal. In Higher Education Review, 1974.

Griesbach, H., Lewin, K., Schacher, M. Studienschicksal und Beschäftigungssituation von Hochschulabsolventen und Studienabbrechern, Band 1 und 2. München 1977.

Grimm, S. Fernstudium und Studienabbruch. München 1976.

James, B.J., Wylie, A. Completion of University Correspondence courses by Adults. In Journal of Higher Education, Vol. XXX, No. 2, 1959.

Kath. G., Oehler, C., Reichwein, R. Studienweg und Studienerfolg. Berlin 1966.

Moses, J. Dropping out in Australasia. In International Newsletter. Society for Research into Higher Education at the University of Surrey, No. 14. Guildford 1979.

Peters, O. Die Fernuniversität im fünften Jahr. Köln 1981.

Rekkedal, T. Correspondence studies-recruitment, achievement and discontinuation. Oslo 1972.

Watkins, D. Student Withdrawal at the University of New England in 1976. In Education Research Unit, Report No. 1, U.N.E. 1977.

Winkelmann, E.: Persönlichkeitsentwicklung und Weiterbildungsmotivation von Fernstudenten. Hagen 1981.